

Black History Month Kickoff *Actual Transcript*

February 2, 1995

I'm delighted to be with you this morning to kick off Black History Month. The theme this year is "Reflections on 1895: Douglass, Du Bois, and Washington."

It's hard to imagine what the world was like for Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois.

They lived in a time when people could be bought and sold. /Human beings were classed as real estate. /Families could be torn apart on a whim. /Children taken from their parents. Thousands of people lived under the crack of a whip from their cradles to their graves.

In this bleak time, some states were enacting the Jim Crow laws. Segregating Blacks from whites in public areas. And about 190 lynchings took place each year.

That's what was happening 100 years ago. But something else was happening, too. Three remarkable people were getting ready to change history.

Several things strike me about these men. First, they didn't just live for themselves. Personally, they found freedom, education and opportunity. But that wasn't enough. They were passionate that their people should have these things, too.

- Douglass was a staunch abolitionist, a journalist and an orator. He founded a Black newspaper for his people. When the Civil War broke out, he urged that Black men be allowed to serve. He knew this would change their status in the eyes of the country. In fact, he helped recruit the celebrated 54th and 55th Massachusetts colored regiments. Douglass also was an advisor to President Lincoln. And he was a strong advocate for women's rights throughout his life. This was a man with a calling for justice.

- Booker T. Washington is best known for founding an agricultural and industrial school. The famous Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. It opened with 40 students in a dilapidated shanty. When he died, it was a fully accredited university. It had more than 100 buildings, owned 2,000 acres of land, and had an endowment of nearly \$2 million. For years, Washington was regarded as the principal spokesman for Black people.

• Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois was one of the most incisive thinkers and effective orators in the country. He was a founder of the NAACP in 1910, and he wrote some 20 books, including:

- The Souls of Black Folk
- In Battle for Peace
- and Against Racism.

Like Martin Luther King would be, Du Bois was regarded as the conscience of the nation.

The other thing that strikes me about these men is that they didn't make their contribution in the same way. They played different roles in the fight for justice.

Du Bois was a political activist, pushing hard for equal rights. Washington focused on making economic strides. Douglass used the power of the press and the political and business arenas.

They took different paths, but they each made an incredible contribution.

I think there's a lesson for us in that. Each one of us has a part to play. There are many ways to work for justice. The point is to do it.

We are doing it at NASA. We're leveling barriers so people can go as far as their talents can take them. Regardless of color. Regardless of gender. Regardless of whether they walk down the halls of NASA or ride in a wheelchair.

We're getting there. Slowly, it's true. But surely, nevertheless. We've made real progress.

- The number of African Americans in SES jobs has almost doubled since 1992, up from 15 to 26.
- We have doubled our support to Historically Black Colleges and Universities since 1993. And by the way, Tuskegee is one of the seven NASA HBCU research centers.
- We've dramatically increased NASA's awards to minority businesses. They've gone up by 51% since FY 1992.

- One exciting symbol of change is that *within days* ~~on Friday~~, Dr. Bernard Harris will become the first African American to walk in space. What a moment that will be. What an inspiration to Black girls and boys across the country.

We have a long way to go at NASA, but we're getting there.

Before I close, there's one more thing I'd like to say. Douglass, Washington and Du Bois are the focus of Black History Month this year. But we can't possibly talk about Black history -- or any history -- without talking about Black women. They've made an incredible contribution.

Harriet Tubman. Sojourner Truth. Rosa Parks. Shirley Chisholm. Barbara Jordan. Carol Mosley-Braun. Toni Morrison. Marian Wright Edelman.

These are just a few of the women who have changed what justice means in this country. Their names are known throughout America. They resonate around the world.

And there are thousands more unsung. Women whose work, and strength, and vision

have pushed forward the cause of justice to where it is today.//And who are pushing still.

I'm honored to celebrate with you today. It's truly a day to feel proud. Proud of the people who've come before ~~you~~^{us}, and the victories they won so dearly.

They wrested human dignity from a system determined not to give it to them. They stood up for what they believed in, and they didn't count the cost. And in many cases, the cost was very high.

Today is also a day of obligation. We have an obligation to the next generation. To the Black women and men who will sit in this auditorium one day.

Help us make a difference to them here at NASA. Join the ranks of Douglass, Du Bois, Washington, Tubman and Truth. Make them proud.

Thank you.

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